

Remember It Well:  
The role of memory in shaping collective history at Sweet  
Briar College, 1989-1996

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“Your memory is a monster; you forget – it doesn’t. It simply files things away. It keeps things for you, or hides things from you – and summons them to your recall with a will of its own. You think you have a memory; but it has you!”<sup>1</sup> Is memory really so deceiving? Or does the individual have more control over memory than John Irving would have you believe? Memory is certainly a powerful tool, but there would be no history without its control. It is believed “...two primary functions of our memory must certainly be to maintain and support the identity and continuity of self, both publicly and privately.”<sup>2</sup> Memory is our identity; it defines who we are by what we have done in the past. The private memory of an individual can differ greatly from that of a publicized, exposed memory and therefore an individual has the ability to express two distinctive thoughts.

Memory, however, can take on a more powerful role when shaping collective history. “Societies and the groups within them remember and use history as a source of coherence and identity, as a means of contending for power or place, and as a means of controlling access to whatever becomes normative society.”<sup>3</sup> The same identity created by the individual transcends to social groups. Memory, therefore, becomes a tool for individuals to assert their place in society, or in a community environment.

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<sup>1</sup> John Irving, <http://thinkexist.com> (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Jerome R. Schulster, “Memory Styles and Related Abilities in Presentation of Self,” *The American Journal of Psychology*, 108, no. 1. (Spring, 1995): 66.

<sup>3</sup> David W. Blight, *Union & Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era* (Kent: Ohio Kent State University Press, 1997), 151-152.

Another important aspect to consider when studying memory formation is time. The substance and quality of a particular memory may be compromised by the amount of time that has elapsed from an event's occurrence and its retelling, or so it is believed. One historian recognized the possible complications pertaining to time in regards to interviewing former slaves. In her article "Assessing Memory: Twentieth Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered", Donna Spindel states, "The slave interviews raise a variety of evidentiary concerns, but the most troublesome hinge on the reliability of long-term memory...More than two-thirds of these men and women were at least 80 years old when questioned...and they were all asked to recall enslavement during childhood."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, over those years, the memory of what happened may become contaminated with related events. Furthermore, the detail of those memories may become ambiguous.

Sweet Briar College has provided an appealing microcosm for these topics. By examining reunion scrapbooks from the college's archive, I hope to better understand the affect of time on memory formation. Furthermore, the idea of private and public memory applies to the questionnaires that were sent to alumnae before the reunion date. For many of the scrapbooks, Sweet Briar women were asked to record a favorite memory of their college years. The knowledge that others would view the questionnaire might seriously influence what an alumna would write down.

The primary concentration of my research has been a selection of four reunion scrapbooks from the Sweet Briar College archive. The first scrapbook on record dates to 1919, and these reunion records continue into mid-1990. Ultimately, I did not so much choose the chronology of my research; rather the content of the sources determined my chronological

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<sup>4</sup> Donna J. Spindel, "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 27, no. 2. (Autumn, 1996): 252.

construction. Furthermore, I decided to focus on the year of the reunion, and not on the year of graduation for a particular class. Since I am examining various affects on memory, it was most appropriate to consider when Sweet Briar alumnae were actively remembering. The following dates represent the year of the class reunion, not graduation, of my four primary sources: 1989, 1993, and 1996. Coincidentally, two of the scrapbooks I examined shared a reunion year. Both the class of 1986 and 1991 had reunions in 1996.

There are, however, some gaps in my research that prevent this topic from taking full form. The organization of Sweet Briar's reunion scrapbooks severely limits the information available to me. The reunion scrapbooks do not compose an entire volume. The college archive contains only one reunion scrapbook for each class. Therefore, I cannot examine the changes in questionnaire responses for the same class over time. Furthermore, there were several classes that graduated before 1934, and a few held reunions and documented the event. However, the scrapbooks for Sweet Briar reunions prior to 1934 contained questionnaires, which did not explicitly ask for a recorded memory. Therefore, I can only speculate as to the intentions of the individual(s) who created the questionnaire. The phrasing used for the question regarding Sweet Briar memories cannot be entirely interpreted, as I do not have the author of the questionnaire to explain her reasoning.

Additionally, the reunion questionnaires are incomplete. Many of the women from various classes neglected to fill out certain portions of their questionnaire. Quite a few did not even bother to record a memory. Whether they could not recall an overly positive memory from their college years, or did not think it important to record one, many of the questionnaires cannot be fully evaluated. Furthermore, on several occasions (primarily the Class of 1934) the Sweet Briar alumna was incapable of completing the questionnaire due to physical or mental illness. In

this case, a spouse or family member might fail to record the alumnae's college memories, and simply write down more concrete information. Additionally, the creator of the reunion questionnaire most likely changed from year to year. That will account for slight variations in the structure of the questionnaire. In this sense, my primary sources are quite limited. However, there are still a substantial number of questionnaires that have been wholly completed.

The 1989 reunion of the Class of 1934 offers two differing arguments concerning the affect of time on memory. On the one hand, Elizabeth Collier recalls her memories of Sweet Briar as, "Neither good nor bad – only bits and pieces..."<sup>5</sup> However, when asked what her happiest memories of Sweet Briar were Emily Marsh replied, "Walks to the monument, the gate, Amherst etc and friends. Especially the spring and fall. The more I think, the more comes back!"<sup>6</sup> Perhaps time affects memory on an individual basis. For some people, the passage of time may severely limit their memory. Others may find their memories come flooding back if they ponder a past event for a while.

However, a change was about to occur in the format of Sweet Briar's reunion questionnaire. In 1993, the Class of 1986 celebrated its 15<sup>th</sup> reunion. The questionnaire sent to the graduates of that class was much the same as ones from previous years. The questions regarding current professions, favorite hobbies, significant others, and accomplishments of children had been carried over from preceding questionnaires. Alumnae were asked to describe recent vacations they took and include pictures of family and friends. However, there was one significant difference in the final question that altered the attitude of the document.

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<sup>5</sup> 1989 Reunion Scrapbook, Class of 1934, Sweet Briar College Archives. Stack 10. 2<sup>nd</sup> shelf from top.

<sup>6</sup> 1989 Reunion Scrapbook.

The closing prompt of earlier questionnaires asked the alumna to recount the happiest or fondest memory from their years at Sweet Briar. The 1993 questionnaire marks the first time Sweet Briar alumnae were given the option to record a PG or X-rated memory. Many of the alumnae took advantage of the prompt to divulge some of their more inappropriate actions as college students. For example, Deb Davison remembered, “Sneaking Doug into the dorm, the parties that I was too drunk to remember! Road trips to W&L<sup>7</sup> and barely making it back for Monday morning classes.”<sup>8</sup> Jane Lauderdale admits to “drinking grain alcohol”<sup>9</sup> for her X-rated memory. Elizabeth Lambert simply stated, “I’ll never tell.”<sup>10</sup>

Many of the members of the Class of 1978, however, chose not to include an X-rated memory. They either left the lines blank, or stated their college years were altogether docile. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was a well-accepted concept that women’s colleges “...preserved a climate in which decorum and obedience were more important than independent thought and action, femininity more valuable than scholarship, and the past more salient than the future.”<sup>11</sup> Author Amy McCandless refers to this idea as ‘preserving the pedestal’.

Perhaps the women who did not discuss their X-rated collegiate experiences were attempting to maintain the pedestal mentality beyond their college years. McCandless goes on to say, “Purity was one of the most cherished qualities of the antebellum woman.”<sup>12</sup> Although 1978 was a long way from the antebellum years, there was still an opinion (especially at colleges

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<sup>7</sup> Washington & Lee University: Lexington, Virginia.

<sup>8</sup> 1993 Reunion Scrapbook, Class of 1978, Sweet Briar College Archives. Stack 10. 2<sup>nd</sup> shelf from top.

<sup>9</sup> 1993 Reunion Scrapbook.

<sup>10</sup> 1993 Reunion Scrapbook.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Thompson McCandless, “Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1940,” *History of Higher Education Annual*, 27 (1987): 61.

<sup>12</sup> McCandless, 47.

in the South) that women were supposed to behave a certain way. Recording an X-rated memory on a reunion questionnaire would surely diminish one's purity under that opinion.

Ultimately, the liberated college memories of the Class of 1978 would not carry over to subsequent reunions. When the Class of 1986 held a reunion in 1996, the questionnaire had returned to its traditional form, with no option for a PG or X-rated memory. The entire attitude of the questionnaire was changed with the alteration of one question, but that attitude shifted in a more conventional direction. Therefore, "...historical memories can be severely controlled, can undergo explosive liberation or redefinition from one generation, or even one year, to the next."<sup>13</sup> When asked what her fondest memory of Sweet Briar was, Cornelia Woodworth remembered, "Small classes, individualized attention, great coaches...great professors."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Alexandra Bernard answered, "The friends I made at SBC<sup>15</sup>, the beautiful campus, the positive learning environment."<sup>16</sup> The responses to the questionnaire in 1996 sound more like an admissions brochure for the school rather than typical college nostalgia.

One of the most recent Sweet Briar reunion scrapbooks comes from the Class of 1991. They held their first reunion in 1996, the same year the Class of 1986 celebrated their 10<sup>th</sup> reunion. The questionnaire sent to alumnae before the reunion contained the same final prompt as the Class of 1986. It said, "Looking back – what is your fondest memory of SBC?" Considering the reunions for both classes were held in the same year, it is likely the alumnae were furnished with the same questionnaire. Elizabeth Hensley recalled, "The beautiful days, clean air, blue skies with crisp white clouds, dell parties – my favorite – and all the faces that I

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<sup>13</sup> Blight, 152.

<sup>14</sup> 1996 Reunion Scrapbook, Class of 1986, Sweet Briar College Archives. Stack 10. 2<sup>nd</sup> shelf from top.

<sup>15</sup> Sweet Briar College.

<sup>16</sup> 1996 Reunion Scrapbook.

enjoyed being with.”<sup>17</sup> Sarah Elliott Pitts responded, “My 4 years at Sweet Briar have begun to blend in my mind as a truly glorious event.”<sup>18</sup> Compared to the colorful memories from the Class of 1978, the responses from the Class of 1991 seemed conservative and non-descript.

Theoretically, the Class of 1991 should have the most detailed, vivid memories of their years at Sweet Briar because they experienced the least amount of time between graduation and reunion. However, Sarah Elliott Pitts’ response on her questionnaire poses an interesting alternative to the theory that memory fades over time. Earlier, Emily Marsh from the Class of 1934 remarked that her memory was returning to her as she thought more and more about her time at Sweet Briar. Even after 55 years, Marsh was able to describe detailed activities from her college experience. Pitts on the other hand, who had only graduated from Sweet Briar five years earlier, could not recall a single, distinct occurrence. Rather, her four-year education transformed to a single event – a single memory.

How can we explain the sudden shift from the liberal, comical memory of the Class of 1978 to the cautious, habitual memory of the Class of 1986? The answer lies with the person who created the reunion questionnaire for the Class of 1986. Many of the formats for the memory-sharing portion of the questionnaire were recycled from previous classes. For example, the question from the 1996 reunions was the same as the 55<sup>th</sup> reunion questionnaire for the Class of 1937. Perhaps the creator of the reunion questionnaires thought it would be better to provide alumnae with a more open-ended question, rather than delegate the nature of their memories. Or perhaps the questionnaire creator for the 1996 reunion did not feel the X-rated memory option was appropriate for Sweet Briar College. It is hard to know exactly why the questionnaire was changed because the creator(s) cannot be questioned on the motives for doing so. Therefore, I

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<sup>17</sup> 1996 Reunion Scrapbook.

<sup>18</sup> 1996 Reunion Scrapbook.



am left with speculation as to the grounds for this sudden shift in attitude and presentation of the reunion questionnaires.

Memory, like history, is about selection. An individual or group in society controls them both, and has the power to shape their cultural meaning. Personal and collective memory is therefore assembled from past events, which were deemed important by an individual or group. My research proves the amount of time that passes between an event and its remembrance is ultimately insignificant. Ultimately, it is the power and personal importance of a memory that determines its longevity. In this sense, memory is the vehicle by which identity is created. Who we are is largely determined by what we choose to remember and disclose to other people. The ability to disconnect public and private memories allows an individual to manipulate the image the rest of the world sees. However, that image can be tarnished by the supposed inappropriateness of a single memory on the part of an individual or on the basis of social norms. In most cases, people will select the most complimentary memories for their public identity.

In the end, history and memory go hand in hand. They create each other and form an endless cycle. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall states, "...We live both the history we have learned through reading and research and the history we have experienced and inherited, passed down through the groups with which we identify, sedimented in the body, and created through talk."<sup>19</sup> Memory is the recollection of former experience, and an individual or society can learn a great deal from the experiences of earlier generations. However, nothing can be learned from the past if it is not first remembered.

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<sup>19</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'You Must Remember This': Autobiography as Social Critique," *The Journal of American History*, 85, no. 2. (Sep., 1998): 441.

## Bibliography

**Primary Sources:**

1989 Reunion Scrapbook, Class of 1934, Sweet Briar College Archives. Stack 10. 2<sup>nd</sup> shelf from top.

1993 Reunion Scrapbook, Class of 1978, Sweet Briar College Archives. Stack 10. 2<sup>nd</sup> shelf from top.

1996 Reunion Scrapbook, Class of 1986, Sweet Briar College Archives. Stack 10. 2<sup>nd</sup> shelf from top.

1996 Reunion Scrapbook, Class of 1991, Sweet Briar College Archives. Stack 10. 2<sup>nd</sup> shelf from top.

1989-1996. The sources about have been taken from the Sweet Briar College Archives. There are many other scrapbooks from previous reunions, so the four I have chosen for my research have been carefully selected from the total source. Each scrapbook contains personal photographs and letters from Sweet Briar alumnae in response to a reunion questionnaire distributed before the scheduled reunion. These sources are perfect for personal accounts from former Sweet Briar students. However, the evidence they provide is biased to preserve the image of the individual and perhaps the college. Furthermore, not every alumna filled out a questionnaire, so the information is limited in that sense.

**Secondary Sources:**

Blight, David W. *Union & Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era* Kent: Ohio Kent State University Press, 1997.

1975-1913. This book discusses several aspects of the Civil War and its aftermath. Chapter seven specifically describes the nature of Civil War reunions, and how they act to create a new national identity. These reunions act to bridge the divide between north and south and serve as a symbol of forgiveness and camaraderie for all Americans. There is little bias for this source and it is useful to explain the social dynamic of warfare as well as collective memory.

Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. "'You Must Remember This': Autobiography as Social Critique," *The Journal of American History*, 85, no. 2. (Sep., 1998): 441.

1998-present. This article addresses the idea of the cooperation of history and memory as a means of closing the gap in America's knowledge about the past. It tells the story of three sisters living in the south during the Civil War. The bias of this article, however, is toward the family and the Lost Cause in the south.

Irving, John. <http://thinkexist.com> (accessed 25 April 2007).

This quotation is used to supplement the introduction. Since the quotation was not intended to reference the specific subject matter of this essay, it is therefore unbiased.

McCandless, Amy Thompson. "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1940," *History of Higher Education Annual*, 27 (1987): 61.

1920-1940. The article discusses the social and religious restrictions placed on women at southern single-sex institutions. The author presents the idea that women in the south were held to antebellum standards of goodness well into the 20th century. She also describes detailed social restrictions and the importance of religion in southern schools. I found the information to be slightly biased toward the character and development of southern women's colleges.

Sehulster, Jerome R. "Memory Styles and Related Abilities in Presentation of Self," *The American Journal of Psychology*, 108, no. 1 (Spring, 1995): 66.

1988-present. This article a person's memory style is composed of their verbal, autobiographical and prospective memories. These three memory styles affect how we present ourselves to others. The author presents the idea that an individual creates a public and a private identity through the use of memory. I do not believe this source is biased.

Spindel, Donna J. "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 27, no. 2. (Autumn, 1996): 252.

1927-1979. The article begins as an attempt to understand the African American slave culture in the United States. Information was gathered through a series of interviews with former slaves from the 1920s-1930s. The largest problem addressed in the article was that most of the former slaves had forgotten their traditions and reverted to those of native Africans. Therefore, their cultural identity was distorted over time. This article is biased in the idea that a long period of time erases memory.